
Editorial

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The idea of a special edition of the *Journal of Education* was mooted in 2004 in recognition of the need to rally adult education in South Africa. Now, two years later, this edition presents six papers which represent the best academic scholarship in this area of education in South Africa today. They are six good papers – but there are only six and it has taken two years to bring them together. How are we to understand the paucity of academic writing in this field?

Broadly speaking, from about the 1970s South African universities began to take an active interest in adult education. Initially this engagement was often narrowly focussed on a liberal adult education tradition, but the individuals and units charged by their institutions with responsibility for this area, rapidly shifted their attention to making sense of, and providing support for, an emerging field of adult education practice. The field was informed by various competing ideological agendas. In this, the humanistic legacy of the 1960s with its T groups and existential preoccupations and the liberal arts tradition of extra mural university classes might be seen as bit players; the major league players were the trainers of industry and the practitioners of progressive and radically orientated adult education then prevalent in NGOs. The training sector was driven by the demands of a growing economy for skilled labour and the quest was for effective and efficient methods for developing skills in the face of the inadequacies of an apartheid education system. The NGO sector was informed both by the need to plug the gaps of apartheid education and by the possibilities which these gaps created for empowerment and transformation.

University engagement in adult education was broadly, though not exclusively, aligned with the radical and transformative agenda represented by the non formal education sector. By the middle of the 1980s a number of fledgling university departments of adult education had been established and were providing training for practitioners from these different traditions, supporting the work of NGOs and developing contested analyses of the field. Adult Basic Education was a present, but not always primary, aspect of this work. For the next ten years these departments thrived. And then almost as suddenly as they had sprung up they began to decline.

There are several factors which may account for this sea-change and they no doubt combined in different ways in relation to specific instances. During the 'struggle years' as the apartheid state repressed all forms of oppositional intervention, universities had afforded one of the few spaces from which non formal education could continue to operate and a number of non formal educational projects and organisations took refuge in universities. These projects and organizations were often associated with, or allied to, adult education programmes and departments. These associations were welcomed by universities as expressions of their commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle. The 1994 transition rendered this rationale obsolete and indeed, as universities have increasingly become instruments of the new state, alternative and oppositional forms of practice become unhelpful and even threatening to both the institution and the state. This loss of symbolic value has rendered adult education departments particularly vulnerable to the restructuring of the universities with the implications which this restructuring holds for the realignment of priorities and the imperatives of financial viability. Always marginal to mainstream education, the transfer to universities for the full responsibility of teacher training, formerly undertaken by teacher training colleges, serves only to exacerbate the marginal status of adult education departments, as the primary focus of educational faculties inevitably shifts to school teacher development.

But it would be mistaken to ascribe the demise of adult education activity in universities to these internal dynamics alone. Significant changes in the field also played a part. The decimation of the NGO education sector was a consequence of similar forces to those afflicting university departments of adult education. In some ways these organization can be seen to be victims of their own success as the educational methods and vocabulary which they had pioneered, as alternative to apartheid education, were incorporated into the new educational system. And insofar as the radical and technicist agendas were represented by the NGO and training sectors, the latter eclipsed the former as the dominant model of the post-apartheid education system with an almost obsessive emphasis on certification which virtually obliterates the opportunities for non formal education. Ironically the State's assumption of responsibility for Adult Basic Education circumscribed the NGO sector's capacity to continue to contribute in this area, so much so that most of the foremost literacy organizations, themselves serviced by university adult education departments, have closed their doors for lack of funding. The tragedy is that the strong rhetorical and constitutional commitment to Adult Basic Education is yet to be matched by real delivery as two of the papers in this edition bear witness. But neither is the decline of adult education simply a national problem. On the world stage traditional notions of adult education can be seen to be in retreat as new meaning is sought for the concept of Lifelong Learning in an information satiated and rapidly changing global society. More

insidiously, a relentless neoliberal agenda, with an obsessive tendency to order the world to its own image, is progressively closing the spaces which adult education previously took as its fora of engagement. These were often messy, organic spaces which were responsive to human needs rather than to the determinants of any system

This would be one explanation for the absence of academic publications in the field of adult education though it does not entirely explain the silence given that the influences sketched here invite a deeper analysis. John Aitchison in two 2003 *Journal of Education* articles titled “Struggle and compromise: a history of South African adult education from 1960 to 2001” and “Brak! – vision, mirage and reality in the post *apartheid* globalisation of South African adult education and training” tells a similar and more developed story. And there could be many others. One of these is the explanation offered by Shirley Walters in the first article in this publication.

Walters takes issue with Aitchison for his “narrow, nostalgic view of adult education” and instead employs a wide-angle lens to reveal the “vibrancy that exists but which Aitchison is not able to see”. Using this lens, Walters reviews the litany of education policy legislation enacted during the first decade of democratic rule and sees in this significant achievements particularly in relation to the mandatory provision for the training of staff. She then treats the reader to a *tour de force* of the myriad activities which can be understood as adult learning (deliberately and carefully distinguished from adult education) and situates this within a framework of Lifelong Learning. This includes learning opportunities provided by civil society organizations, the private sector, and particularly continuing professional development, and by government departments - specifically the Departments of Labour, Education, Correctional Services, Health, and Water Affairs. From these examples she concludes that “there is a wide range of learning or capacity building programmes” which she sees as largely disconnected and unlikely to understand themselves within an adult and lifelong learning framework. This opens to question the usefulness of a frame which reveals itself as primarily descriptive, fundamentally related to human resource development and whose association with core values of adult education is relatively recent and not secured. One is left wondering whether the proverbial baby has not been cast out with the bathwater. Walter herself examines the competing views of Lifelong Education in a useful paragraph earlier in the article.

Walters’ article concludes with a brief review of the Western Cape’s project which seeks to construct a ‘learning province’. This theme can be understood to be taken up in a very different context in the second article in this edition in which Linda Cooper explores through a case study, a trade union as a learning organization. This study breaks the mould to the extent that it seeks to

understand the opportunities and patterns of learning in an organization which is not normally characterized as a learning organization, having as it does, purposes orientated towards social action rather than competitive advantage. Using Situated Learning Theory, Cooper examines several trade union activities – notably meetings and mass action through a learning lens. Interestingly in this article, learning refers to informal learning which contrasts sharply with the notion of formal lifelong learning in the first article. Whether this is indeed informal learning is perhaps a moot point. While the learning itself may occur informally, it is clearly self-consciously intentional which moves it towards non formal education. Complicating this definitional nuance is the distinction which has to be maintained between the learning of the organization as an organization and the learning of its members.

Bhekathina Memela and Sandra Land's article on an education and democracy project in KwaZulu-Natal with its explicit Freirean roots, non formal delivery and community context, shifts the frame to a more traditional model of adult education. Despite its playful metaphors, it speaks to the margins with a directness which lays bare the complexity of this kind of organic and holistic engagement with its false starts, disappointments, triumphs and hope. In so doing it reveals the gulf that exists between the reality of this grass roots experience and the systems and policies which are intended to address these needs.

Edith Kiggundu and Jane Castle's article which looks at how rural ABET centres respond to HIV/AIDS is in a similar vein. Even though the context moves to public ABET centres and a formal curriculum, the elements of non formal community education can be seen in the income generating projects and the texture of the context. The article contrasts the experience of a deep rural ABET centre with one situated in peri urban environment. The research reported, discovers, not surprisingly, that HIV/AIDS is integrated into the curriculum more readily in the latter than in the former with a concomitant greater awareness of the disease, its causes and its consequences. This is attributed to the more strongly developed social networks and social capital which is manifest in the peri-urban ABET centre. More generally the article points to the massive challenges which ABET centres face in implementing policy requiring the incorporation of HIV/AIDS education into the ABET curriculum, without the means or support. The gulf between policy and implementation is again very evident.

The last two articles focus directly on literacy, arguably the centre of adult education endeavour. John Aitchison and Anne Harley demonstrate how poorly constructed official statistics give a distorted impression of illiteracy in South Africa. Careful consideration and analysis of the contradictions lead Aitchison and Harley to a reinterpretation which reveals limited and possibly

even negative progress towards the reduction in the level of illiteracy in the second half of the 1990s. They point to instances where raw data scores actually show increases despite apparent or claimed proportional improvement. There is also evidence that functional illiteracy amongst adult women may have increased. Definitional differences and ambiguities in relation to functional literacy, the inclusion of FET learners, the number of ABET learners and of Public Adult Learning Centres all combine to paint a confused and perplexing picture of illiteracy and ABET provision in South Africa which may account for some of the exaggerated official claims, but the reader is left wondering whether these should be attributed to carelessness or callousness. Provincial differences which reveal the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal as the worst afflicted provinces also serve to obscure the extremes when these are combined in national figures.

While Aitchison and Harley provide us with a bleak reading of the state of illiteracy, the final article in this edition by Peter Rule can be seen as an exhortation. *The Time is Burning* is a quotation from an address by Professor Bhola to a recent international conference on literacy which was held in Pietermaritzburg. Rule begins with a survey of the current 'parlous' state of Adult Basic and Literacy Education which mirrors that provided by Aitchison and Harley. He tempers the cold statistics with a life story which makes stark the lived reality of the millions who are condemn by their illiteracy to live in isolation from the mainstream economic system. Rule then moves to explore the basis for the constitutional right to literacy and the arguments which might be brought to bear to compel delivery based on this right. It is a clarion call to action; we can only hope that it will be met by the clamour of action as the current national initiative presently represented by a Ministerial Committee on Literacy begins to bear fruit.

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